

Bringing Bedouin into the solar tent

The government has failed to provide not only justice for the Bedouin, but also dependable, clean electricity for all citizens. The prime minister now has a chance to do both.

By Kher Albaz and Yosef I. Abramowitz

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The government of the State of Israel has a historic opportunity to reach a land accord with its Bedouin citizens.

A cabinet vote is expected soon on implementation of the recommendations of the Goldberg Commission, which was established with the goal of finally coming up with a just and mutually beneficial solution to the ownership dispute over large tracts of land in parts of the Negev, contested by the state and by Bedouin families.

The prime minister and his staff are studying a series of additional economic recommendations to be decided on at the same time as the land vote. The most unconventional yet powerful suggestion comes from the mayor of Rahat, the largest Bedouin city in Israel. His idea: Let the Bedouin provide solar power to the state.

As the current solar regulations have been formulated and are being implemented, 99 percent of the economic benefits of the solar feed-in tariffs – the additional subsidy needed to make such energy profitable – are going to Jewish entrepreneurs. The government decided in early 2009 that the Negev would be a special renewable-energy zone and that green energy would constitute 5 percent of Israel's national energy supply by 2014 and 10 percent (equivalent to 4,000 megawatts) by 2020. So far the government has failed to put forward a believable or viable plan for reaching either of those goals.

If the Goldberg Commission's recommendations on land compromises provide sufficient incentives – including solar ones – for Bedouin, this community could be the largest provider of solar power in the country. There are currently 700,000 dunams (a dunam is one-quarter of an acre) in contention (roughly 2-3 percent of the Negev). If, as part of the land compromises, 200,000 dunams were to be allocated to Bedouin families and zoned for solar-power generation, it could provide 10,000 MW of electricity, create thousands of green jobs and align Israel's renewable energy production with Europe's goal of 20 percent-plus by 2020.

The rest of the lands obtained through compromise could be used for agriculture and other economic projects. Yet solar power on Bedouin lands would be the major engine for the economic empowerment of one of Israel's poorest communities.

The Arava Power Company is currently building Israel's first solar field, with a capacity of 4.95 MW, at Kibbutz Katura, for NIS 100 million. While half the investment went abroad for technology, NIS 50 million stayed in the local economy, providing local jobs. Ten-thousand megawatts of Bedouin solar power would infuse \$40 billion into the country and local economy, especially if there were a provision that one third of the materials for Bedouin fields would come from the fruit of Bedouin labors. The government is very keen on having solar technology and manufacturing companies set up factories in the Negev to employ Bedouin.

Solar power is land intensive. Under today's situation, the Bedouin are at a disadvantage, since the government does not recognize their land rights. Yet if the Goldberg Commission's proposals are approved, and the government and the Bedouin are able to agree on a percentage of disputed lands that will be transferred to the latter's ownership in return for the Bedouin ending their historic claims against the state, then these lands should come with the zoning to enable the building of solar fields.

The Bedouin Land Authority, a state arm, is in favor of solar incentives for Bedouin precisely because such a move would advance land compromises, which are needed if the state is going to move ahead with any major infrastructure projects in the Negev. The heads of all seven municipalities in the Bedouin areas favor solar incentives in order to bring major investment, industry and jobs to these poor communities.

Yet no Bedouin family with a historic claim to land is going to accept a compromise, with the hope of a solar field and the income and jobs that come with that field, if the government does not set aside a sizable solar quota: a number of megawatts reserved specifically for Bedouin solar fields.

Every time the regulator establishes a solar quota and incentives nationally, other land owners and entrepreneurs quickly submit applications for well beyond the quantity of the quota. For the current 300 MW quota for medium solar fields, for example, there are license applications for the equivalent of 1,200 MW of production, so only a quarter of the proposed fields will even be built, unless those limits are hopefully raised.

Having proof of ownership of land is a prerequisite for applying for a solar license, so today the Bedouin have no chance of even competing for the opportunity to participate in solar incentive programs. And by the time their land claims are eventually settled and registered, there will be no solar megawatts left for them.

The government of Israel, by setting aside even a modest quota of 1,000 MW of Bedouin solar power until 2020, would be inviting both reasonable compromises on land and significant investment and jobs in Bedouin areas.

Sixty percent of Israel is desert. The government has thus far failed to provide not only justice for the Bedouin, but also dependable and clean electricity for all its citizens. The prime minister now has a chance to do both by enlarging the solar tent to include the Bedouin. Then Israel can truly be a renewable light unto the nations.

Kher Albaz, a longtime Bedouin leader, served for many years as the director of regional social services for unrecognized Bedouin towns and the Segev-Shalom Council. Yosef I. Abramowitz, an investor and human rights activist, is president of the Arava Power Company, Israel's leading solar developer. This is the first in a monthly series on issues of renewable energy.

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